



PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF PROVINCES
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OPENING REMARKS BY THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF PROVINCES, HONOURABLE N. A. MASONDO, ON THE OCCASION OF THE MINISTERIAL BRIEFING SESSION ON THE VACCINATION PROGRAMME, INCLUDING THE EXPANSION AND ACCELERATION OF THE VACCINATION PROGRAMME TO INCLUDE OTHER COHORTS AT NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL LEVELS

DATE: 31 AUGUST 2021 **VENUE:** VIRTUAL **TIME:** 10H00

Greetings!

Programme Director, Deputy Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, Honourable Sylvia Lucas

Minister of Health, Honourable Joseph Phaahla

Deputy Minister of Health, Honourable Sibongiseni Dhlomo

NCOP House Chairpersons, Honourable Jomo Nyambi and Honourable Winnie Ngwenya

NCOP Chief Whip, Honourable Seiso Mohai

Honourable Permanent and Special Delegates

Honourable Members of Provincial Executive Councils

Representative of the South African Local Government Association

Ladies and gentlemen

Programme Director, let me start by congratulating Dr Joe Phaahla on his recent appointment as the Minister of Health, as well as Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo on his appointment as the Deputy Minister of Health. We wish them the best during their tenure. Given their experience, one is confident that the task of leading the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic is in good and capable hands.

It was on the 5th of March 2020 when South Africa woke up to the news of its first confirmed positive case of Covid-19. Eighteen months later, we find ourselves having to share the pain of the continuing loss of family members, neighbours, colleagues and friends from this virus.

In hindsight, there is no way we could have been saved or spared from a pandemic that has had such a devastating effect on the lives, livelihoods and health of the people in the country and across the globe.

As a result, we continue to witness the new struggles of the people who have lost their providers as they face the unrelenting economic whirlwinds occasioned by the pandemic.

The latest unemployment figures released by Statistics South Africa in the past week, are a stark reminder of the intensity of the devastation wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy.

As Members would recall, in February this year during the State-of-the-Nation Address, the President of the Republic spoke of “an unrelenting and

comprehensive response to overcome the coronavirus”. He said that such a response must see us doing everything in our means to contain and overcome this pandemic through, amongst other things:

- Intensifying our prevention efforts and strengthening our health system; and,
- Undertaking a massive vaccination programme to save lives and dramatically reduce infections across the population.

It is common cause that the unequal scramble for the vaccines, with wealthy countries having pre-ordered billions of doses, placed the low- and middle-income countries in a predicament. It became apparent that these countries, including South Africa, could not compete for the equitable share of the supplies. Earlier commitments made to the continent were not honoured, leading to serious supply challenges.

This occurred despite warnings from the medical community that we were not going to get rid of the pandemic until we get rid of it everywhere.

However, as issues of availability started to change for the better and supply chains began to improve, we saw marked improvement in the procurement and distribution of the vaccines across the country.

When the Health Ministry briefed the National Council of Provinces on the Vaccine Roll-out Strategy towards the end of February this year, the

number of vaccines administered stood at just over 40 000. Today, the number is above 12 million, with at least 9 million people vaccinated.

Even so, this is still a long way to the target of more than 40 million people that, earlier this year, the Ministry of Health said was needed to reach population immunity. This suggests that we need to find more meaningful ways to increase people's level of participation in the vaccination programme if we are to put up a formidable fight against the virus.

Programme Director, it is indeed encouraging to note that South Africa has secured enough supplies of the vaccine. However, we need to deal with the challenge of ensuring participation by increasing numbers of the citizens across the country.

Our people need to understand that vaccines work and are safe. In fact, the lesson from history is that vaccines helped a great deal to eradicate polio, smallpox and diphtheria. Many of those who are delaying to be vaccinated have either forgotten this fact or are not aware of it.

Experts are the first to admit that no vaccines are 100 per cent effective at preventing illness. However, they point out that evidence does exist that vaccination may make illness less severe for those who are vaccinated and still get sick.

Therefore, vaccines are key to us waging and winning the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. There is no point in being reckless and putting the

lives of people at risk by casting doubt on scientifically proven means of saving lives. We must allow scientists to lead us on issues of science. Not all of us are endowed with the knowledge and experience they possess. Let us build on this - by deepening the work that is at hand.

Of more importance, we need to be alive to the possibility that the virus may be with us for some time if not for a very long time. And that instead of simply wishing it away, we must learn to live with it.

Already, indications are that the effectiveness of the vaccines may fade with time. We have seen the Delta variant of the virus pushing up the numbers of infections even in highly vaccinated countries. For example, one such country, Israel, is already giving vulnerable people booster shots and other countries like Britain are said to be considering the introduction of booster schemes.

This may therefore be an enduring fight.

As such, Programme Director, government, business and labour may need to have a long-term view of how they communicate the importance of medical interventions. This should take into account the fact that other than the coronavirus, people need to know more about viruses and bacteria in general and other related health hazards if we are to achieve acceptable levels in and of public health.

Public health is important in that it helps individuals in communities to spend more of their years in good health. This has enormous benefits particularly for the working-age population.

Programme Director, at this point, one would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who are occupying the front lines in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly our healthcare and other frontline workers, for their commitment and hard work.

We also thank the leadership of the Department of Health for always ensuring that we are briefed on the developments relating to the different aspects of the programme to fight the Covid-19 pandemic. That valuable guidance is being provided at this critical moment. We remain eternally grateful.

Today's briefing is intended to inform us as public representatives about the implementation of the vaccination programme and its expansion to include other cohorts. This is important because our oversight role assists to ensure that government can achieve better outcomes in the provision of public services.

Programme Director, I do appreciate the opportunity to make these few opening remarks and I am looking forward to the presentations and the engagement.

I thank you.